

Ancient Chinese in Australia

Were the Dutch
explorers really the
first discoverers of
Australia?
Or was it the Spanish
or Portuguese?
It certainly was not
Captain James Cook!

by Rex Gilroy

Indeed, if you knew as much as I do about our early history of discovery & exploration, you would feel sorry for our teachers of history. They have to confine themselves to the old story of how James Cook (1770) discovered our east coast, although the Dutch visited our west coast fully 164 years before that date.

In fact, the earliest sketchy outline of a great southern continent can be found upon one of a number of carved stone world maps preserved in Iran, carved by Persians up to 3,000 years ago.

The Greek scholar Eratosthenes, included a southern continent in his world map, drawn as a sphere, in the 3rd Century BC. He approximated the Earth's diameter to within 1.3% of today's estimates, and also calculated that the continent of America comprised one third of the Earth's circumference, which was astonishingly close to the truth.

Crates of Mallus, in Asia Minor, constructed a 5m diameter world globe in 150BC. Crates reasoned the Earth was a sphere and needed balancing continents to keep it in equilibrium.

He therefore envisaged four continents divided by two great oceans. Africa, Europe, and Asia he described as a single continent, "Oecumene". Crates then drew in "Perioeci", which we now call North America.

In the vicinity of Panama, and south of it, he placed "Antipodes", which is now called South America. His fourth land mass balancing out the other continents and situated far below what we now call the Indian Ocean, he named "Antoeci", now known as Australia.

How much this great forward thinker depended upon reason, deduction or vague reports from seafarers we may never know. Nevertheless, he anticipated Columbus' discovery of America by more than 16 centuries and the discovery by European seamen of Australia 17.5 centuries later.

Lucian of Samosata (120-180AD) wrote of a distant land far across the [Indian] ocean, where the savage inhabitants carried their young in pouches. Samosata stood on the Euphrates River, which flows into the Persian Gulf, from which vessels sailed for India and beyond. Had Lucian obtained a confused account of Australian aborigines and kangaroos from some mariner?

Evidence of contacts with Australia by explorers from the ancient world abounds. Take, for example, the remains of an ancient shipwreck, thought to be that of a Phoenician trireme at least 2,000 years old, and which was located by the late Perth skin diver, Allan Robertson, in King Sound, Western Australia, some years ago. (A future article in Nexus by this author will explore the extensive evidence of middle east contacts with

Australia in biblical times).

But what of the ancient Chinese, who were voyaging the Pacific Ocean centuries before the Europeans? Evidence is accumulating to prove that they too played their part in the discovery of Australia.

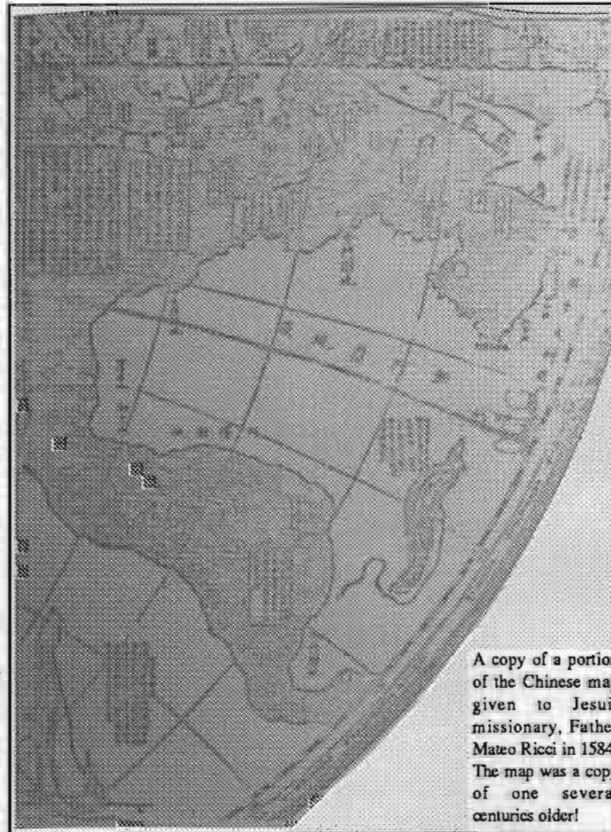
The Javanese, with whom the Chinese traded, had an extensive knowledge of our waters, and could have been instrumental in directing Chinese explorers to our shores.

Like the earlier civilisations of the near and middle-east, the Chinese certainly possessed often enormous wooden ships and navigation aids to enable them to undertake world-wide voyages in antiquity.

For example, some of their huge junks were capable of carrying over 1,000 people each. One type of huge junk measured at least 140 metres from bow to stern, and more than 30 metres across the beam. Between the fifth and eighth centuries, the Chinese invented paddle-wheel operated vessels. These were operated by slaves working tread-mills inside the ships. By the 12th Century, they were building huge war ships with up to 23 paddle-wheels on each ship. A 15m rudder of one of these massive vessels has in recent years been unearthed on the coast of China. It is now preserved in a Peking museum.

According to ancient writings preserved in China, a Buddhist monk, Fu Shai in 458 AD may have landed in southern California after an 11,000km voyage in one of these enormous ocean-going junks. Another Chinese explorer, Shu Shan Gee, is credited with having visited the same coastline about 1,000 years before Columbus "re-discovered" America.

However, unlike the later European explorers, the Chinese were less interested in establishing colonies in far-off lands than in establishing temporary colonies solely for the purpose of trade or for mining of precious stones or minerals which they shipped home to China.



A copy of a portion of the Chinese map given to Jesuit missionary, Father Mateo Ricci in 1584. The map was a copy of one several centuries older!

It was Franciscan missionaries who went to Chia in the 16th Century, who were the first Europeans to obtain written evidence pointing to Chinese contacts with Australia.

This evidence included copper scrolls dating from the 6th Century AD onwards, including a crude 6th Century map of Australia.

These scrolls are still being translated.

They tell of such things as voyages across the Pacific Ocean in the 10th and 11th Centuries in gigantic fleets of junks - 60 to 100 ships carrying up to 200 or more crewmen each.

It is obvious the Chinese possessed considerable knowledge of Australia as evidenced by their ancient writings. For example, Confucius in his "Spring and Autumn Annals" (481BC), records two solar eclipses having been observed by Chinese astronomers, possibly in Arnhem Land - one (by

modern calculation) on April 17th, 592BC, and the other on August 11th, 553BC.

Another record, "Atlas of Foreign Countries", written between 265 and 316AD, describes the far north coast of the mysterious great south land as being inhabited by a race of one-metre tall pygmies - an obvious reference to the pygmy sized Aborigines identified by Australian anthropologist Norman B. Tindale, in 1938, in the mountains above Cairns, Queensland.

In 338 BC, Shin Tzu wrote of the presence of apparent kangaroos kept in the Imperial Zoo, Peking and further similar reports continued in several later dynasties.

Emperor Chao about this time dispatched a fleet of junks with orders to return with marsupials from the "southern land of Chui Hiao", and a Chinese book "The Classics of Shan Hai", written some time before 338BC describes our Aborigines and their use of the returning boomerang.

About 213BC, Emperor Qin Shih



The 80mm tall statuette of the Chinese god Shou Lao, unearthed at Darwin in 1879, from beneath the roots of an ancient banyan tree.



This mystery aboriginal rock carving, found in 1970 near the waterfront at Berowra near Sydney, has been called the "Dancing Chinaman", from the figure's pose, and the garments depicted which are reminiscent of those of ancient Chinese seafarers. Did aborigines depict a pre-Cook visit to the Sydney district by Chinese mariners centuries before European exploration of these shores?

Huang-ti (who instigated construction of the Great Wall), obsessed with finding the "magic fungus of immortality", dispatched an enormous expedition of some thousands of men and women, including several thousand children, in an armada of huge junks, to the fabled lands of Peng Lai (Java), Fong Zhang (New Guinea) and Ying Zhou (another ancient Chinese name for Australia), the "great golden land".

This enormous expedition of mushroom-pickers was never heard of again and Qin Shih Huang-ti, unable to obtain the "magic fungus" of immortality died in 210BC, at the age of 49.

The Chinese appear to have been wary when navigating Torres Strait. Many of their expeditions through the Strait came to grief due to the dreaded Torres Strait Islanders, who, until early this century, were head-hunting cannibals.

In fact, the islanders regarded Chinese as being just about Number One for flavour as they found them nowhere near as salty as white men!

Ancient relics are further proof of Chinese visits to our shores.

In 1948, fragments of Ming Period (14th Century) blue and white porcelain were dug up on Winchelsea Island, north-west of Groote Eylandt; and a large Chinese copper urn of this age was unearthed in Arnhem Land some years ago.

In 1961 a 2,000 year old vase bearing a crude map of the Australian east coast was discovered in Hong Kong.

Another map, dating back 2,000 years and drawn on porcelain, exists in Taiwan. It shows the southern coastline of New Guinea, the east coast of Australia as far south as the Melbourne area and the crude outline of Tasmania.

Another porcelain map has since been found in China - dating to 1477, it not only describes much of the American west coast, but some Pacific Islands; including the North and South Islands of New Zealand, Australia and New Guinea and the islands of south-east Asia and the coast of China.

Another map, uncovered in Peiping earlier this century, describes the great south land of "Chui Hiao", drawn by a Chinese trepang captain in 1426.

In 1584 the Jesuit missionary, Father Mateo Ricci, during a lengthy stay in China, was given a copy of a large world map, the original at least centuries older. The portion dealing with the islands of south-east Asia includes the unmistakable outlines of New Guinea and Australia.

In the late 1940's, a discovery proving ancient Chinese voyages into the west Pacific region was made by a team of anthropologists while researching in the Yasawa Islands to the west of Fiji.

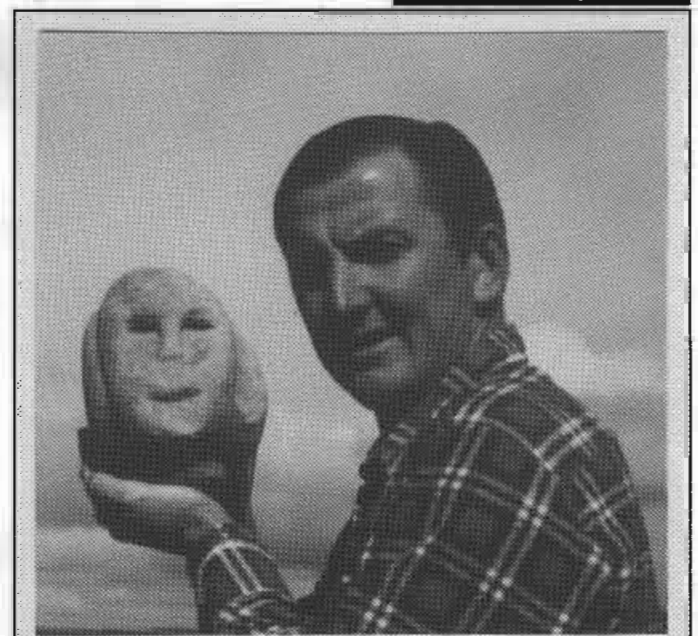
The men found an ancient copper mine cut into a hillside.

Lettering surrounding rocks they discovered numerous centuries-old Chinese letterings.

Natives on the island were later found to possess Asian racial features. They say the island was visited by a race of "yellow men" long before the coming of the Europeans.

Thirty-five years ago, a jade Buddha was unearthed near Cooktown in far north Queensland, deep below ancient soil deposits.

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Historian/archaeologist Rex Gilroy, holding the carved stone head of the ancient Chinese goddess Shao Lin, unearthed in 1980 by a woman from ancient sediments of a beachfront hillside outside Milton, on the NSW south coast.

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And at Darwin in 1879, workmen dug up an 80mm tall statuette of Shou Lao, the Chinese god of longevity, from beneath the roots of an ancient banyan tree.

Dating from the Ming period, it has been linked with an expedition believed to have been made to our shores by Admiral Cheng Ho, on the orders of Emperor Yung Lo.

The fleet consisted of 62 nine-masted ships, 140 metres in length and was accompanied by 28,000 men and their families.

Cheng Ho (1385-1440) also possessed the magnetic compass on this voyage. Invented by the Chinese in 1090, it was not "discovered" in western Europe for another 100 years.

Cheng Ho sailed from Shanghai in 1405 with orders to visit the islands of south-east Asia on diplomatic and trade matters.

He was also instructed to establish a colony in the vicinity of present-day

Darwin while astronomers accompanying the expedition made observations of the southern skies.

He was also asked to make offerings to the Celestial Spouse, Shao Lin, a Taoist goddess who watched over mariners at sea.

During Cheng Ho's stay near Darwin, some of his men are said to have explored deep inland, and part of his fleet is claimed to have carried out the circumnavigation of Australia before returning to China.

About 1958 on a cliffside inland from Taree, on the NSW north coast, campers found a large weathered, centuries old relief carving of Buddha.

Later, in 1980, a young woman unearthed a carved stone head of the Chinese goddess Shao Lin, from centuries-old sediments on a beachfront hillside near Milton, on the NSW south coast.

Eventually, hearing of my researches into pre-Dutch Australian exploration, she

donated the relic to me. After personally inspecting the site of the discovery and the strata from which it came, I was convinced that the relic's original owner had visited the Australian east coast centuries before Captain James Cook.

Was the relic discarded by a member of Chen Ho's 1405 expedition? Or, perhaps some earlier Chinese expedition to our shores? We shall never know.

One thing is certain, pre-British/Dutch voyages to Australia is an indisputable fact!

Otherwise, if, we have long been led to believe, that Europeans were first to discover Australia in the 18th century - what then, were kangaroos doing in the Imperial Zoo in Peking in 338 BC?

Rex Gilroy welcomes any information helpful to his researches from readers. He can be contacted by phone on (067) 787 201, or by writing to him at the "Pre-Dutch Australian Exploration Research Centre", PO Box 473, Kootingal NSW 2352